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Religion in Scandinavian Crime Fiction

By Kim Toft Hansen

Crime fiction has generally been associated with empirical investigation and rational analysis. The genre is often historically linked to modern society, secular mind-frames and natural and realistic explanations of events (Hansen, 2012). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a link to appearances transgressing the epistemological boundaries of the genre. In addition, contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction is showing a significant interest in aspects of human existence transcending empirical and rational realism. Recent genre developments build a bridge into questions about spirituality.

What I intend to do here is, firstly, to develop a theoretical framework for this discussion where I consider theories of transgression and religion. Secondly, I wish to run through five relatively popular examples of Scandinavian crime fiction – including Stieg Larsson – to show how this genre trend works. Lastly, I will connect this with what has been dubbed *mediatized religion* and a more general, philosophical explanation of why we see this development: The project of modernity is, as a result of cultural changes, at the moment *transgressing* its own epistemological boundaries opening up into what has been called *the post-secular*. Methodologically, as it may appear, I wish to give a cultural explanation of a growing tendency in recent Scandinavian crime fiction. More precisely, I wish to connect this genre development with the concept of transgression and a philosophical framing of religion. So please forgive my somewhat strained introductory remarks defining religion as an aspect of religious philosophy. I hope my analytical examples will unlock the nerdy details.

In his book *Transgression* (2003) Chris Jenks explicates how a “common characteristic of all religious belief, namely the recognition of the sacred and the profane, presupposes a classification of all things, actual and imaginary, into two opposing domains”. This is, by all means, a result of modernity’s philosophical focus on a combination of the rational and the empirical stemming from theories of Enlightenment (Schanz, 2008). “The two realms are not alternatives”, Jenks then underlines, “they are profoundly distinct, ranked in terms of power and dignity, and insulated by antagonism and hostility”. The on-going skirmish between *modern realism* and *religious metaphysics* is, then, the most basic version of this hostility – in the words of the sociologist Peter E. Glasner *soft secularism* has attempted to privatize religion and remove it from the public sphere and *hard secularization* has had as its basic premise that reason in the end will outdo religion (Glasner, 1977).

“The two orders”, continues Chris Jenks, “jealously patrol their own boundaries to prevent the contamination of one by the other and thus the perpetually revived structure of interdictions or taboos serves to keep things apart”. Nevertheless, this clear boundary between modernity’s philosophical realism and religious metaphysics has been undergoing a transformation, but is then again almost anticipated by Jenks: “Transition from one realm to the other is not wholly precluded, and it requires not movement but metamorphosis” (Jenks, 2003: 29). In other words, modernity and religion need to transform in order to be able rub off on each other. The boundary between realism and the religious, says philosophers of the post-secular, has been transgressed into a significant type of modernity that now again leaves room for the spiritual. This has – as we shall see here – been affecting modern, contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction as well. Endingly, I return to the concept of the post-secular.

As it may appear throughout my talk here, I see a connection between metaphysics as a philosophical practice, religious philosophy and aspirations from supernatural elements. This is not at all to say that these spheres are the same, but it is an attempt to find a framework that deals with various transgressions of the rational and the empirical in different ways that still have an interface. All three spheres – metaphysics, religion, and the supernatural – appear in Scandinavian crime fiction (Hansen, 2012), though in my paper here I only deal with religion. *Metaphysics* is in this framing a philosophical reflexive practice that deals with absolute preconditions for the historical and the relative, whereas *religion* is a much more formalized, liturgical practice that results in both dogmatic doctrines as well as a transposed and informal framing of life. The supernatural is, then, a more superstitious treatment of epistemological transgressions. Incidents of diverse transgressions can, then, lead to what has been called *religious or metaphysical experience* (Schanz, 1999), while metaphysics and religious philosophy still attempt to discuss these experiences within limits of valid arguments. Metaphysics would probably refute most supernatural explanations, but both spheres show an aspiration towards sensations beyond rational and empirical explanations. Religion would then appear somewhere in the middle of these sensibilities: “Religion deals with cultural strategies of interpretation and social mechanisms”, writes I.S. Gilhus and L. Mikaelsson, sociologists of religion. They introduce the specifically religious with a reference to “transempirical powers, i.e. beings transgressing the senses” which would be for instance gods. These powers induce the appearance of ideal interpretations and practices that come out “perfect and deeply meaningful” (1998: 19).

This ends my theoretical and philosophical framing of my paper. I now turn to my specific analyses of religion in Scandinavian crime fiction which hopefully makes this dense philosophy appear in clarity. There are various ways that religion may appear in crime fiction. The two extremes are a subversive critique of religion on the one hand and an affirmative apologetic religious discourse on the other. This generally means that crime fiction may claim to do away with religion which is basically in line with its link to modernity. On the other hand crime fiction does as well attempt to ratify religious thought which is a rather unusual expansion of the genre. However, many narratives of crime and religion are not particularly attracted to neither harsh criticism nor sermonizing divinity – several narratives are placed somewhere in the middle whereby modern rationality is in dialogue with spiritual reflections. My five examples, then, represent various media – i.e. radio drama, TV-fiction, film, and literature – while they also show different modes towards the divine from subversive criticism to affirmative divinity.

My first example is a radio drama by the Danish dramatist Tomas Lagerman Lundme. His *Women Reproving God* [*Kvinder der irettesætter Gud*] (2009) is a story about the police officer Thomas who investigates the murder of a young woman. The investigation uncovers a Christian female sect that, as the drama phrases it, “tries to liberate women from men”. Two women have escaped the sect – one of them is a journalist who is trying to prove the fundamentalist intentions of the sect that justifies its actions through divine approval. This means that the journalist becomes – as the title mentions – a woman who reproves God. Thomas, the investigator, is in line with her position and, endingly, he claims that the sect consists of “daft religious idiots enchanting the truth”. In an article Carole M. Cusack explains religion in crime fiction as “pictured as ‘Other’ to mainstream society [where] the authors do not seek to understand these communities, but use them as a challenge to the norms of society”. Lundmes sect in *Women Reproving God* is by all means ‘Other’ to mainstream Danish society. This is, then, a good example of subversive critique of religion.

This subversive critique of religion appears as well in Stieg Larssons *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Larsson, 2005). This novel applies at first – through five quotations from Leviticus, the third book of Moses – a gender critical perspective on the Old Testament. These quotes are drastic doctrines about how women would be treated should they break the Law of Moses, and they work in analogy with four quotes in the novel from a Swedish study of men’s violence against women. However, Stieg Larsson himself diverges from this critical angle on religion by letting Lisbeth Salander comment on the matter – with a clear reference to the original Swedish title *Men who hate woman* [*Män som hatar kvinnor*]: “This is no mad serial killer who has misread the Bible. It is only

a usual fool who hates women” (Larsson, 2005: 369). Nevertheless, the quotes suggestively smoulder on a more symbolic and transfigured level. This leads to speculative readings of the three novels which I return to later in my paper.

My next example – the Danish TV-series *The Protectors* [*Livvagterne*] (2008) – is somewhat more complex. Several episodes of the series deal with religiously motivated extremism and terror that is either experienced or prohibited by the Danish intelligence service. At first this means that the series is very affirmative towards the increased authority of the police, which should make you think that the series places the criminal parties in the subversive role. Though this is the case dealing with very hard extremism this does not describe the overall intension of the series.

The three main characters in *The Protectors* represent three different monotheistic religions. One is Muslim, one is Jewish, and one is Christian. But the series not only represents three major world faiths – it also attempts reconciliation between the three (though Judaism is rather inadequately represented compared to the other two). The religious cease-fire is underlined by the fact that one of the agents moves into a closed Christian Free Church where he uncovers an old mosaic of father Abraham. Abraham is a grounding figure in all three religions that are, thus, also called *Abrahamic religions*. This model of atonement throughout the series is again touched upon close to the ending of the second and last season. Here, the job of the agents is to protect a Catholic nun who goes by the name of Sister Abraham. This character is inspired by an actual Danish nun – Kirsten Stoffregen Pedersen – who preaches atonement between the Abrahamic religions, which goes for the character as well. At some point in the series the three agents actually end up staying in the Free Church together which symbolically implies the idiom that the religions can actually stay *under the same roof*. Investigating a possible terror attack in Denmark, the Christian agent shows the mosaic to a Muslim woman and says: “Abraham came along”. This expression bears a double meaning: Abraham both came with the house and with all three faiths. They all have the same point of origin.

These two were my radio- and TV-examples. Before turning to my literary examples it is already possible to connect these developments to Jenks’ theory of transgression. “Transgression is”, he writes, “a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (Jenks, 2003: 2). This means that to transgress is as well a reference to the transgressed, the boundary, and through such transgression new insight, new epistemologies are gained. Basically, the transgression in crime fiction is, as it appears historically, a *generic transgression* – genres are normally enhanced and changed by fusing otherwise abnormal elements into the existing formula (Altman, 1999). However, writes Jenks, “transgression serves as an extremely sensitive vector in assessing the scope, direction and compass

of any social theory” (Jenks, 2003: 2). This goes as well for popular genres that are extremely sensitive towards cultural developments: ”Genres are, hence, based on socially, culturally and historically determined codes, conventions, traditions or simply contracts between sender and receiver” (Bondebjerg, 1993: 171). Relating the two associated spheres, culture and genre, a transgression becomes both a cultural and a generic transgression, which is reflected into a popular genre such as crime fiction. That transgression, in Jenks’ words, is caught in the middle of denial and affirmation is then a very good example of the middle course that *The Protectors* seem to be taking between religious critique and spiritual apologetics.

Now, before turning to my socio-philosophical explanations I delve into three literary examples where I detect a very similar expansion of genre interest. The first example is a return to the Millennium trilogy by Stieg Larsson. The second example is the novel series about the investigator Barbarotti by the Swedish author Håkan Nesser. The last example is the novel *The Last Good Man* [*Den sidste gode mand*] by the Danish author pseudonym A.J. Kazinski – a pseudonym for the film director and writer Anders Rønnow Klarlund and the writer Jacob Weinreich.

As already discussed, Stieg Larsson shows a subversive interest in the role of religion in the first novel of the series. Interestingly enough Danish church segregations show an interest in the series in an immediate continuation of their interest in crime fiction in general. Journalists and priests are very concerned with the relationship between crime fiction and Christianity – I have in fact been invited to theological symposiums dealing with ‘crime fiction as the biblical narrative of our time’. I do generally not profess to this Christian framing of the genre, but I find an interest in the fact that Christian segregations actually *try* to claim motivation for the generic expansion. One interesting example of this is the article “The perfect victim” [“Det perfekte offer”] by the theologians Pernille and Eyolf Østrem – the rather surprising subtitle of the article is in translation “The figure of Jesus in Stieg Larsson’s trilogy about Lisbeth Salander”. The first sentence of the article reads: “On Good Friday Lisbeth Salander is crucified by the media” (9). This frame of reference entices the authors to locate a wide range of symbolic readings of Biblical appearances in the novels. This means that – for a moment now – I now leave the floor to the authors in order to show how they attempt to claim a religious validity in the trilogy. In continuation they write: “This media crucifixion resembles how the Pharisees and the scribes used the actual actions and statements of Jesus to distort an image of him that would help them incarcerate and convict him in favor of themselves” (10). Additionally, they refer to the confrontation between Lisbeth and her father as “a mythological encounter of the devil and Jesus in the dessert” (12). Nevertheless, the authors do thaw

the almost one-to-one relationship between Lisbeth and Jesus in an attempt to show both likenesses and differences between the trilogy and the narratives of the New Testament – and I quote their analysis in length to show how the argument goes:

“Just to make sure: Lisbeth Salander is not Jesus. She cures her guardian Palmgren who has been disabled by a stroke. She happily socialize with sinners and the excluded whether it is the ‘lesbian SM-band’ *Evil Fingers*, the poor George on the island Grenada, or the socially incompatible nerds in the hacker-republic. She is omniscient (autistic), almighty, and omnipresent as long as she has an internet connection, and she has invisible powers when needed – which she uses to beat up bikers or obliterate those who step on her. / And she rises from the dead and hence definitively consolidates her similarity with Jesus.” (14f)

These considerations do – as it may appear – come quite close to an over-interpretation of the relationship and similarity of the narratives which may be why the authors underline the differences. And I here continue the quote:

“Despite all these parallels there are still a few missing pieces. According to the Christian doctrine about the trinity Jesus was God in human incarnation: both God and man at once, inseparable from God and the Holy Ghost as well as his human nature. / Lisbeth Salander is not Jesus Christ, the son of God, true God and true man. / She is just a true human being doing unusual things, things close to the outer limits of human capabilities, things requesting omnipotence – this omnipotence is common for God and the author. / To put it another way: Salanders performance is so excessive that we must think of them as pure literary fiction or as an expression of something supernatural, divine.” (14f)

They continue to locate parallels: “The journalist Dag Svensson resembles St. John the Baptist” (17). “In the trilogy, the police occupy role played by the Romans in the gospels” (17). “Mikael Blomkvist is the Peter of the Salander-trilogy, about that there is no doubt” – even though I would note that Mikael does not let down Lisbeth as Peter lets down Jesus. The authors of the article do, however, underline that Salander’s forgiveness is very hard to locate: “Where Jesus would say that

the smallest offence needs an equal grace as the biggest, Lisbeth says that the smallest offence can and must be punished as hard as the biggest” (23). The end scene in *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest* (2007) where she nails her murderous half-brother to the floor leaving him to the vindictive bikers instead expresses a retributive eye-for-an-eye logic in contrast with the Christian ethics of turning the other cheek. As far as I can see it is very hard to determine whether or not the parallels are as obvious as the authors claim them to be. I find their analysis in a way *too* determined to cross-read the trilogy and the gospels, but I find it very interesting that theologians *attempt* this reading. This does not in itself tell us a lot about crime fiction in general or Stieg Larsson in particular, but it tells a lot about how crime fiction is used by the church to gain a voice by way of a popular media phenomenon.

I return to the relationship between media and religion later. Now I turn to my second literary example: Håkan Nesser’s novels about the investigator Gunnar Barbarotti. Nesser’s series consists of four books so far, running from *Man Without Dog* [*Människa utan hund*] (2006) until the very recent *The Lonely* [*De ensamma*] (2010). Barbarotti is a complex detective character with a firm belief in rational and empirical investigative methods, but on the side he is trying to prove or disprove the existence of God. He employs a complicated point system where he asks God for help in personal matters. If he helps him out God gets a certain amount of points, but if God is unable to help he subtracts points from the system. When we meet Barbarotti in the first novel God is ahead by an insignificant amount of points, but throughout the novels God gets ahead. Barbarotti has, though, promised himself that he would not ask God for help in his investigations, but in the second novel *A Completely Different Story* [*En helt annan historia*] (2007) – during a particularly complicated case – Barbarotti ends up asking God for help. And gets it! In the fourth novel *The Lonely*, then, God is up by 20 points. In this novel Barbarotti is confronted by severe personal problems and while his wife may be dying he ends up talking to God. This ends his point system and, by now, signifies – yet with some narrative uncertainties – that Barbarotti has proven the existence of God for *himself*. Meeting God is, here, by all means an epistemological transgression for the policeman.

That this is personal proof is important in this relation. Barbarotti is not member of a specific religious community: “I have faith”, he says. “which means that in my view there is a God. And that I have a relation to him. But I don’t think that I’m religious in the regular sense of the word” (Nesser, 2010). Consequently, he never goes to church, but he still shows openness towards a spiritual mode of living. In the midst of investigation in *The Lonely* Barbarotti meets a lapsed preacher who has left the Swedish folk church in order to *save* his faith. This guy talks about a God that does

not live in churches, who is not contacted from the pulpit, but anyhow God is present in his life. By underlining his deinstitutionalized faith, our investigator Barbarotti recognizes this mode of faith as well. He chooses an individualistic spirituality.

My final example is A.J. Kazinski's novel *The Last Good Man*. Here, a Danish investigator and a Danish physicist are caught up in a mystery about a larger number of peculiar deaths around the world where there seems to be no clues at all. At least not until they stumble across the Jewish myth describing that there are 36 good men on Earth, though if they all disappear we would reach the Apocalypse – these good men appear to be dying. When we enter the story there are, as it appears, only two good men left – and one, an Italian policeman, dies shortly after. Various clues, then, seem to point towards our own investigator who then turns out to be no other than *the last good man* – and the guy doing all the killing seems to be a mysterious supernatural being, maybe God himself.

By the end of the novel the empirically minded couple – underlined by the fact that one is a physicist – sees their ordinary world picture crumble in favor of a supernatural explanation of existence. This is basically a reversion and a transgression of the normal narrative development of crime fiction where the supernatural may appear but only in transition until a natural explanation has been found: “as soon as the crime novel is read”, as Tzvetan Todorov writes, “it leaves no doubt that no supernatural incidents have taken place” (Todorov, 1989: 49). In *The Last Good Man* the natural explanation is in fact in transition until a supernatural explanation has been found. The physicist actually ends up having a near death experience and she becomes a spokesman for a negotiated version of science and spirituality: “the opposition between religion and science”, she says, “is powerfully hyped” (Kazinski, 2010: 240). The investigator later states: “I’m not particularly religious. For me there is a natural explanation for this”. The physicist then says: “Yes. We have found a natural explanation. We just don’t understand it yet. This is the way all new discoveries begin” (Kazinski, 2010: 356). The supernatural account, in this way, ends up being the “natural” explanation in the novel. In itself, as meeting God in Nesser’s novel, this deals theoretically with a transgression of the boundary between – as I will show underneath – a disenchanted modernity and the re-enchanted culture of post-secularity.

This ends my analytical illustrations of my paper. These examples were, though, but a pivotal excerpt of a much larger corpus of texts. You will find this tendency reflected in quite a few titles. In various ways authors reflect this cultural interest in religion, spirituality, and the supernatural – these are authors such as Arne Dahl, Gunnar Staalesen, Henning Mortensen, Tom Egeland, Johan

Theorin, Camilla Läckberg, Åsa Sigurðardóttir, Svend Åge Madsen, and Axel Bolvig (see Hansen, 2012). They are respectively very different in how they deal with these themes, but collectively they underline a conspicuous interest in modern spirituality.

One way of dealing with this is through what has been called *mediatized religion*. Research of a various kind shows that media play a very important role in shaping the way we think. This is characterized through the concept of mediatization. The before mentioned Gilhus and Mikaelsson (2005) talk about a flourishing interest in new religiosity on the Internet. Christopher Partridge (2008) deals with what he calls the *occultural* significance of information technology. Stig Hjarvard (2008), in a book about mediatization, calls this development *enchanted media*. Hjarvard is particularly interesting for me since he deals with *both* media and religion *and* popular genre fiction. Firstly, his research shows a massive increase of dealings with religion and the supernatural in the media throughout the past decade. Secondly, he has interviewed a number of people about their choice of genre if they were to read about “magic, spiritual or religious subjects” (Hjarvard, 2008: 199). Surprisingly, almost 28% would choose crime fiction or thrillers, which – compared with the fact that only 6% would choose horror fiction – shows that the assumed connection between modernity and crime fiction is not upheld by the readers themselves.

Generally, this increased focus on religion and spirituality in Scandinavian media seems to rub off on popular genre fiction. Genres dealing with the supernatural – such as horror or fantasy – are exceptionally popular at the moment, while crime fiction seems to open up. The irrational, the supernatural, the divine seems to attract more and more attention in crime fiction – the genre appears to transgress an otherwise noted boundary between rationality and supernaturality. One much more general reason for this cultural and generic development may be what has been called *self-constrained* or *post-secular modernity*. The Danish philosopher Hans-Jørgen Schanz (2008) deals with the relationship between modernity and religion, and in his view modernity and modern thinking has come to realize that it seems unable to answer all questions, questions for instance about grief, happiness, death, existence, good and evil. And because modern thinking has realized its inability to provide sufficient solutions to these difficult questions, modernity becomes self-constrained. Being self-constrained, modernity then transgresses back into religious and spiritual thinking. Though, it is, nevertheless, still religion in an appropriate reflexive distance applied by modernity – in other words, what I locate in Schanz’ philosophy signifies the same middle course as found in contemporary crime fiction such as especially *The Protectors* and the novels by Nesser and Kazinski. This means that if crime fiction is, at first, connected to modernity, and modernity, se-

condly, becomes self-constrained, the genre must as well open up towards religion and spirituality. But as we have seen in my examples from Scandinavian crime fiction, the genre does not alone apply an apologetic and dogmatic religiosity – it often places itself somewhere in the middle of a parameter between subversive critique and affirmative spirituality.

This renewed interest in spirituality combined with reflexive criticism has been called *post-secularism* (Sigurdson, 2009). A post-secular society is a society that blends an awareness of questions of spirituality with an inclination towards reflexive critique. The prefix *post-* alone signifies that a transgression of the secular has been going on. Post-secularism has, as well, come to realize that religion has far from been removed from the public sphere, which is why this philosophical trend shows an interest in reflexive spirituality rather than institutionalized religion or hard secularism. Even Jürgen Habermas has – by way of a critique of the post-secular – underlined that secular citizens may “learn something from religious contributions”, though he is still maintaining the stanza of a political secularization of society (Habermas, 2006: 10). The examples of subversive critique of religion from Tomas Lagerman Lundme and Stieg Larsson are alone more in line with this type of modern reason. In many ways, the new mode of post-secular spirituality is, however, reflected in an obvious and precise way in particularly Nesser’s novels about Barbarotti’s negotiations with God: God is not just a customary fact – spirituality is there to be discussed, but it is as well very present in especially *The Protectors* and Kazinski’s *The Last Good Man*. With these analyses and this socio-philosophical background it seems suitable to discuss this genre development as *post-secular crime fiction*. Post-secular crime fiction is crime fiction that on the one hand deals with rational and empirical investigative methods, but combines this with a renewed interest in questions of the spirit and modern religion.

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